

The Underground Railroad

It is said that sometime in 1831 a slave named Tice Davids was being chased by his owner. Davids reached the Ohio River, plunged in, and began to swim for his life. His angry master, who was not far behind, looked around for a boat. Finding one at last, he quickly set off after his slave. Davids, however, vanished from sight when he reached the opposite shore. His owner searched the countryside and the nearby Ohio town but found no trace of his slave. He finally gave up and returned home. "Tice must have gone off on some underground road," he told his friends.



As this story spread, it began to be told that Tice Davids had escaped on an "underground railroad." Soon this became the name for the network of secret routes that slaves followed north to freedom. Before long other railroad terms were used. The houses that hid the slaves became "stations." The owners of the houses became "stationmasters." The **fugitive** slaves were called "passengers," and those who guided slaves to liberty were called "conductors."

Most passengers on the Underground Railroad traveled at night, often using the North Star as their guide. Some rode in farm wagons with false bottoms, but many had to journey on foot. During the day they hid in swamps, forests, or stations in the free states in the North. It took **stamina**, determination, and courage. They were exposed to bad weather and were weakened by hunger. Even worse, they faced the constant risk of being found by professional slave catchers who could even operate in the northern states. That's why many runaways fled all the way to Canada. Once there, they couldn't be captured and returned to slavery.

Both whites and African Americans worked as stationmasters and conductors. Most acted in secrecy because they could be sent to prison or fined for helping slaves escape. The stationmasters hid passengers in attics, root cellars, false closets, and rooms concealed by trap doors. To identify their stations, they often used **prearranged** signals like a quilt hung over a porch railing. Runaways then announced their arrival with a special knock or a password. One of the most active stationmasters was a store owner named Levi Coffin. Known as the "President" of the Underground Railroad, he sheltered about 3,000 slaves over the years.

Conductors had the most dangerous job. They traveled to the South, helped slaves escape, and led them from station to station. Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave, was a fearless conductor. She made 19 trips to the South and guided over 300 passengers to freedom. At one time a reward of \$40,000 was offered for her capture.

In 1865, the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution brought an end to slavery. At last the brave efforts of the workers and passengers on the Underground Railroad were no longer needed.



COMPREHENSION CHECK



1. Which of these states an **OPINION** about Tice Davids?
 - ☐ A. He swam across the Ohio River.
 - ☐ B. His owner found a boat and set off after him.
 - ☐ C. He went off on an underground road.
 - ☐ D. His owner went home without finding him.
2. In the second paragraph, it says that fugitive slaves were called "passengers." Which of these is the best synonym for the adjective *fugitive*?
 - ☐ A. excited
 - ☐ B. worried
 - ☐ C. disobedient
 - ☐ D. fleeing
3. Why weren't runaway slaves completely safe when they reached the free states in the North?
 - ☐ A. There weren't any Underground Railroad stations in the North.
 - ☐ B. There were no swamps in which to hide.
 - ☐ C. Almost all northerners were in favor of slavery.
 - ☐ D. They could still be caught there by professional slave catchers.
4. In paragraph three, it says that escaping slaves needed to have stamina. Which of these word pairs are the best synonyms for *stamina*?
 - ☐ A. politeness and courtesy
 - ☐ B. kindness and thoughtfulness
 - ☐ C. strength and endurance
 - ☐ D. wisdom and knowledge
5. Why did most workers on the Underground Railroad operate in secrecy?
 - ☐ A. They were ashamed to admit that they were helping slaves escape.
 - ☐ B. They could be imprisoned or fined for what they were doing.
 - ☐ C. They didn't want to be rewarded for their efforts.
 - ☐ D. It made it more fun to act in secrecy.
6. In paragraph four, it says that stationmasters "often used prearranged signals." The word *prearranged* starts with the prefix *pre*. What is the meaning of this prefix?
 - ☐ A. not
 - ☐ B. before
 - ☐ C. after
 - ☐ D. many
7. About how many slaves did Harriet Tubman lead to freedom?
 - ☐ A. 300
 - ☐ B. 19
 - ☐ C. 13
 - ☐ D. 3,000
8. Which of these statements about the Underground Railroad is true?
 - ☐ A. Only white people acted as stationmasters and conductors.
 - ☐ B. Escaping slaves usually traveled during the day.
 - ☐ C. Levi Coffin was an important conductor who guided many slaves north.
 - ☐ D. The final destination for many runaway slaves was Canada.